Featuring a foreword by Ed Catmull and an afterword by Michael Lewis

Jennifer Aaker
Naomi Bagdonas

Humour, Seriously

Why Humour is a Superpower at Work and in Life*

'A smart, funny, brilliant book on how to be smart about being funny, brilliantly. Buy it' Sarah Cooper

*And How Anyone Can Harness It. Even You.

Advance Praise for HUMOUR, SERIOUSLY

'Humour is magical. It can make fear and pomposity vanish and creativity and resilience appear in their place. The ultimate guide to using the magical power of funny as a tool for leadership and a force for good, *Humour, Seriously* is an intoxicating mix of science, strategy and slapstick – a knee-slapping, mind-expanding tour de force' Daniel H. Pink, number one *New York Times* bestselling author of *When*, *Drive* and *A Whole New Mind*

'A smart, funny, brilliant book on how to be smart about being funny, brilliantly. And I'm not just saying that because they say I am smart, funny and brilliant in it. Buy it' Sarah Cooper, comedian and author of *100 Tricks to Appear Smart in Meetings*

'Business is serious and the world is serious, especially right now. That means we need the ideas described in *Humour, Seriously* even more than ever. Not because levity and humour are ways to relieve the pressure of serious times, although they are, but because they unlock our humanity in the moments where we most need it' Tim Brown, Chair of IDEO and author of *Change By Design*

'I've learned (often the hard way) that the best way to be taken seriously is to not take yourself too seriously. My teams are always at their best when approaching problems with levity, which entails both humility and optimism and always engenders trust. Plus, it's more fun – like this book!' Eric Schmidt, former CEO and Executive Chair of Google (Alphabet)

'Fresh, profound and consistently entertaining. Aaker and Bagdonas bring some irresistibly compelling science to the art and application of humour' Kelly Leonard, Executive Vice President of The Second City

'A sharp, incisive and genuinely funny read that translates knowledge of the world of comedy to tools that actually work in the world of business' Anne Libera, Director of Comedy Studies at The Second City

'If you think your workplace would work better if everyone laughed more, this is your playbook' Chip Heath, number one *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Power of Moments*

'I've always used humour as a secret weapon at Spanx. Jennifer and Naomi make a scientific case for the importance of using humour not only in business but in life. It's an incredible way to connect with customers and build culture . . . This book will help anyone embrace the power of laughter and humour, both' Sara Blakley, founder and CEO of Spanx

'Humour is a powerful tool for fostering connections between people. It's an act of social courage that, when used correctly, has a transformative effect. *Humour, Seriously* gives us the tools we need to deploy humour expertly in any environment' Susan Cain, number one *New York Times* bestselling author of *Quiet*

'Eye-opening, hilarious and absolutely original, *Humour, Seriously* will change the way you think on the job, about the world, and in your life' Leslie Blodgett, founder and former CEO of Bare Essentials

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'Of all the known ways to ruin humour, the most common start with the words "research", "analyze" and "professor". The bad news is that this book features all of those words. Prominently. The good news is that against all odds, you'll actually have fun reading it. It probably won't turn you into Ali Wong, Dave Chappelle or Hannah Gadsby, but it will give you a much deeper appreciation of how they think – and teach you some new ways to make people laugh' Adam Grant, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Originals* and *Give and Take*, and host of the TED podcast *WorkLife*

'In this eye-opening, important and utterly enjoyable book, Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas use science to explain how humour at work (and in life) helps alleviate stress, anxiety and burnout. Come for the humour, stay for the insights' Arianna Huffington, co-founder of The Huffington Post and CEO of Thrive Global

'If this book and Brad Pitt walked into a bar, and I could only pick one, I'd take the book home with me' Nancy Lublin, former CEO, Crisis Text Line and DoSomething.org

'Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas have written a remarkable book for a remarkable moment in history. I long ago learned that when weighed down by serious matters, one may best be taken seriously by seeking out a certain light-heartedness as an expression of humility, optimism and confidence on the road to the serious business of nurturing trust and leading others' Joel Peterson, Chairman of Jetblue Airways

'This myth-busting, grin-inducing, data-driven humdinger of a book simply nails what I've clung on to for years: that humour can be more than ephemeral entertainment. When appropriately curated, it creates the right culture for success. In fact, absence should be a cause for concern. You may eat your five-a-day and walk ten thousand steps but when did you last check if there was enough laughter in your life, in your team, in your business? If you had a centuries-old, tried and tested tool that enhances rapport, creativity, collaboration, resilience, leadership, mental and physical health, sales and more – why wouldn't you use it?' Neil Mullarkey, author, speaker, improviser and co-founder of London's Comedy Store Players

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Naomi Bagdonas is a lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and an executive coach. She runs a strategy consultancy, designing and facilitating innovation workshops and coaching executives and celebrities for appearances ranging from *Saturday Night Live* to the *Today* show. Formally trained at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, Bagdonas performs at comedy venues, sharing how life's absurdities are common experiences connecting us, and teaches improv comedy for resilience in San Francisco's county jail. Her rescue dog Maxxy describes her as gullible and full of treats.

Dr Jennifer Aaker is the General Atlantic Professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and a leading expert on how purpose and meaning shape individual choices and how technology can positively impact well-being. Her work has been widely published in leading scientific journals and featured in the *Economist*, *The New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Atlantic* and *Science*. A recipient of the Distinguished Scientific Achievement Award, Aaker counts winning a dance-off in the early 1980s among her greatest feats.

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SERIOUSLY

WHY HUMOUR IS A SUPERPOWER AT WORK AND IN LIFE*

*AND HOW ANYONE CAN HARNESS IT. EVEN YOU.

JENNIFER AAKER

&

NAOMI BAGDONAS

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To our parents, grandparents, and Connor (who is neither).

To Carla and Andy and the countless people who were with us on this journey.

To those who do good and devote their lives to serving others.
To the present.

* * *

Look to this day!
For it is Life,
The very Life of Life.

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FOREWORD

Humour Makes Us Human

By Ed Catmull

Let's talk about humour. But first, let's talk about stories.

The typical story has three acts that go something like this: The first act tells the audience what the problem is and why they should care. The second act is where it all goes wrong—so very, very wrong. The third act is where, unlike in real life, it all gets resolved. How exactly it ends, though, is, just like in real life, always a surprise.

In our Pixar movies, we searched for stories that had meaning, something that resonated with us personally, that emerged from our collective experiences, that illuminated the fun and games, adventures and heartbreaks. He wasn't just a rat—he was a courageous little rat with big dreams of becoming a world-class chef.

We found that the best way to connect that meaning to people on a fundamental and emotional level is to deliver it with humour.

In fact, it's pretty hard to make a point about deeper meaning without humour. It all becomes too on the nose, too obvious. It doesn't take; it's more like lecturing. And no one wants a lecture from a rat in a chef hat.

Humour isn't about jokes or arbitrariness—to resonate, it should arise naturally out of the characters themselves. The space and texture that creates humour within the narrative of a film, or the arc of a character, is what creates meaning for an audience.

That's the way life has to be as well.

We all want meaning in our lives. And yet, there are times when

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work and life get serious and hard, mundane and stressful. Having a sense of humour doesn't just punctuate and offset the seriousness—it allows the meaning to come through. Unexpected moments with co-workers, partners, families, and friends shake things up and keep you on your toes. They define the shape of your relationship as much as the hard moments do. Playfulness and bonding with one another in the good times are of tremendous value during the times when things get more serious.

This is true not just for us as individuals, but for us as leaders of organizations, too.

Pixar has faced many problems since its inception. Difficult, serious problems. Money problems, culture problems, losing fantastic team members who defined us . . . problems. In these moments, what I found was that *what* I said as a leader didn't matter—they were just words that washed away; what people grabbed on to was *how* I behaved. One has to admit failures and take actions that demonstrate real values.

Doing so with a healthy sense of humour—with the intellectual perspective, empathy, and humanity it brings—is a vital part of responding to the unexpected, of adapting to new realities. Words matter little; behavior and attitude are what count.

A sense of humour is part of what makes us human. It's a deeply connecting and empowering thing. Deploying it doesn't make light of serious things, it means you're able to move forward, in spite of those serious things.

And that's exactly what a good Pixar protagonist does in the third act. They adapt, they change, they fix the problem. In our movies, they do it with humour . . . and, sometimes, with a dash of paprika.

Where there is serious work punctuated by levity—that's where we find meaning.

Have a meaningful read,
Ed

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HUMOUR, SERIOUSLY

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INTRODUCTION

Gravity

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and Levity

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"The law of levity is allowed to supersede the law of gravity."

—R. A. Lafferty

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One crisp October evening in 2016, a group of ten behavioral scientists and lecturers stood on a stage in Chicago. We hailed from Stanford, Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Pennsylvania—a cast of characters who could (and probably do) lecture in their sleep on topics like human cognition, artificial intelligence and human well-being, global wealth distribution, negotiations, and decision making.

But we weren't onstage together that day to lecture (or sleep). We were there to perform sketch comedy.

Now, academics—like businesspeople—aren't known for being funny. (Or charismatic or fun or cuddly . . . we get it.) Yet the ten of us had convened for a two-day humour summit at the world-famous comedy theater and training center The Second City, because the research to date couldn't be more clear: Humour has a profound impact on human psychology and behavior. And we believed that this emerging field just might become one of the greatest competitive advantages in business. Seriously.

Over those two days, we discussed past work done in the field and brainstormed new areas of interest that would define our future research together. The questions ranged from the broad and lofty, like how humour influences power, trust, and creativity, to the tactical, like how to craft a joke. Also we threw an imaginary purple ball around and yelled things like "Blerg!" and "Zippity zoop!" You know, in the name of science.

We got a crash course in humour techniques from Second City comedy experts Anne Libera and Kelly Leonard, who had trained

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talents like Stephen Colbert, Steve Carell, and even some talents not named Steve, like Tina Fey, Chris Redd, and Julia Louis-Dreyfus. All of which culminated in an exhilarating onstage sketch comedy performance.

The summit kicked off a multiyear exploration confirming the hypothesis that brought us all to the stage that day: From a research perspective, humour is serious business. And it's vastly underleveraged in most workplaces today.

For some, this stems from a fundamental misunderstanding about humour's benefits: the belief that gravity and levity are at odds. But the research tells a different story. That in fact, when we refuse to take ourselves so seriously, we relieve the stress standing in the way of serious work, create more meaningful connections with our colleagues, and open our minds to more innovative solutions.

For others, they understand at least some aspects of humour's power intuitively, but when it comes to harnessing it with intention, few know how.

This is a serious problem. Beyond leaving a whole lot of benefit on the table, this lack of levity in our work lives has dire consequences for our physical health (our workplaces are killing us), our relationships (the single greatest driver of happiness at a time when we are growing more disconnected than ever), and our teams and our companies (which are struggling to compete in a rapidly transforming world). We also suspect that it contributes to a permanent and unsightly frown known as "resting boss face."

We wrote this book to set the record straight, to unpack the benefits of humour for our careers, our businesses, and our lives using the sexiest means known to academics: behavioral science (plus a lot of help from comedians and business leaders). In it, you'll learn why humour is so powerful, why it's underutilized, and—most important—how *you* can use more of it, better.

Yes, you. Our favorite reader. The hero of this book.

But enough about you.

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About Us

We have spent the last five years living and breathing the study of humour: Jennifer, as a behavioral scientist and chaired professor at Stanford who studies how meaning and purpose shape the choices individuals make. And Naomi, as an executive coach to leaders and celebrities, who has spent the last decade straddling corporate strategy and comedy.

We are also the creators (and teachers) of a course called "Humour: Serious Business" at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, where we teach some of the world's most ambitious, smart, and caffeine-addled business minds how to use humour and levity to transform their future organizations and lives. Our MBA students get the same amount of academic credit for our course about the power of humour as they do for "Managerial Accounting" and "Financial Trading Strategies."

Now, that's funny. Also: serious business.

But how did we get there? For Naomi, it started with an offhand comment from a client:

"I bet I know exactly what you do on Friday nights, Naomi."

An odd remark from someone who'd hired her as a consultant, but Bonnie and Naomi had grown close over the last three months. As a strategy consultant, Naomi oversaw the team helping Bonnie's organization redefine their customer experience. The project was intense, and she and Bonnie had spent hundreds of hours working together.

Bonnie continued, in all sincerity, to describe her vision of Naomi's Friday night. It involved Naomi "re-ironing her blouses for the next week" in a gray-walled apartment with landscape paintings and a cat. When pressed, she guessed the cat was named "Cat."

Oof.

In an instant, Bonnie had held up a mirror revealing Naomi's

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work self—and the reflection was disheartening in its inauthenticity: someone polished and austere and irrefutably good at her job, but utterly bereft of the joy and personality that made her *her*.

What's more, Bonnie's assessment wasn't off base; Naomi had been leading a double life. And not the steamy kind with fast cars and fancy hotels; no one at work knew that Naomi studied and performed comedy by night, and none of her comedian friends knew she advised Fortune 50 clients by day. For years, she kept these pursuits carefully siloed—after all, neither screamed "transferable skills" to the other.

But upon closer inspection, Naomi saw the incredible power of humour outside of comedy—how it had shaped her most meaningful friendships defused tense moments, prompted perspective and empathy, persuaded people to act, and bolstered resilience, especially in hard times. All while making things a whole lot more enjoyable.

After the experience with Bonnie, Naomi set out to prove that she could have more joy at the office and make humour an asset at work—and that she could help her clients do the same.

Jennifer had no time for that shit.

For her, humour was never a focus. Sure, she liked laughter (note: it's impossible to write that sentence without sounding like a sociopath), but was far more interested in research, writing, and getting work done.

That view fundamentally changed for her in 2010, when she wrote a book, *The Dragonfly Effect,* with her husband—about the power of story and networks to drive positive change in the world. During the first year following the book's launch, she worked with a Stanford student group called 100K Cheeks, applying the tools from the book toward the goal of getting over 100,000 new people into the national bone marrow registry.

That was when she met Amit Gupta, one of the seventeen patients she worked with. Amit had been diagnosed with leukemia and needed a bone marrow transplant, but no one registered with

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the National Marrow Donor Program was a perfect match. And so, he and his friends set out to reach as many South Asians as possible and persuade them to register with the donor bank.

Though Amit was mired in one of the most objectively somber corners of the human experience, Jennifer saw how he—and his friends, family members and colleagues—somehow managed to infuse humour and levity into every nook and cranny of his campaign.

On his website (AmitGuptaNeedsYou.com), visitors were greeted by him sporting a goofy red T-shirt and equally goofy smile. "Bone marrow donations are done with a process similar to blood donations. It's painless, but boring." He posted lighthearted messages about his search for a donor on Twitter and Tumblr, and hosted in-home bone marrow events at which he joked that guests should "BYOSA: bring your own South Asian" and "swab parties" at trendy NYC bars. And he teamed up with DoSomething.org to enlist comedians for the campaign—like a lighthearted (but heartfelt) PSA with Aziz Ansari and Chris Pratt urging students to "give a spit about cancer."

It worked. On January 20th, 2012, Amit found a perfect match.

While confronting his own mortality, Amit cultivated levity, which made him and everyone around him more motivated, nimble, and effective at getting people to register. After watching Amit persist, rally, and ultimately survive this deadly blood disease, Jennifer realized that humour could drive people in ways she had never before imagined.

* * *

Through these experiences, we realized we'd sorely underestimated humour's potential to transform work and life. So we set out to look at both.

Naomi dove more fully into the study of comedy—moving to LA to learn from her comedic heroes and train at the Upright Citizens

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Brigade Theatre, while integrating principles of comedy into her coaching work with executives.

And Jennifer turned to research, specifically the behavioral science of humour, how it works to influence people's motivation, decision-making, and emotional and physical health—and how it might be harnessed to scale meaningful impact in the world. All while (non-sociopathically) laughing.

But the real magic—the David Copperfield, fireworks-worthy, make-the-Statue-of-Liberty-disappear stuff—would start when we brought these worlds together.

The two of us met in 2014, after Jennifer invited Naomi to guest lecture in her "Power of Story" class on a completely unrelated topic: how to effectively blend story with data.

Watching the students react to Naomi delivering her content, Jennifer was astonished to see that they were laughing—hysterically—while learning about neurochemical brain systems and factor analysis.

This fact bears repeating: They were laughing while learning about neuroscience and statistical methods. What's more, Jennifer observed that the students applied Naomi's concepts over the course of the semester and remembered them vividly eight weeks later.

When we hopped on the phone to debrief after the quarter was over, the call digressed from a simple recap into a passion-fueled exploration of the questions that would inevitably lead us here, with you: What if, together, we could blend the behavioral science of humour with principles from comedy, and apply them in a way that would actually be useful in business? Could this deepen relationships, make people more effective and joyful at work, and fundamentally transform companies—and maybe even the world?

And so we sharpened our quills and began to write. This book is our attempt to answer those questions.

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What We've Been Up To

Over the past six years, our partnership has included conducting a dizzying amount of research, running experiments in the real world, and building a beautiful friendship along the way.* Specifically:

We ran studies involving over 1.5 million people across 166 countries with the goal of understanding things like how and why humour works (or fails), how humour differs over one's lifespan and across cultures, the nuanced relationship between humour and status, and particularly how the self-proclaimed unfunny becomes (less un)funny.

We pored through empirical research in psychology (e.g., decision-making and motivation), sociology (e.g., social movements and narrative identity), and neuroscience and biology (e.g., brain chemistry and physiology of laughter). And then we pored over some more research, just for a treat.

We trained with some of the best comedy institutions in the world, from sketch comedy with The Second City to improvisational comedy with the Upright Citizens Brigade and the Groundlings Theater. We spent hundreds of hours practicing and then performing in dimly lit improv theaters and experienced firsthand what it feels like to bomb, again and again. And then, slowly, to get better.

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* Which one of our students described in a course evaluation as "uncomfortably close."

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We jet-setted* across the country to meet real-life comedians who shared their wisdom and secrets. We talked to Norman Lear about the power of humour to tap a cultural vein, interviewed *The Onion* founder Scott Dikkers about his creative process, and asked comedian Sarah Cooper about the inspiration for her lip sync videos. We cornered Jimmy Fallon in the backstage hallway of *The Tonight Show* and sent perfectly sharpened pencils to Seth Meyers because he once mentioned, under his breath, barely audibly, that he likes them. Our process was academic and charming and not at all stalky.

We interviewed hundreds of leaders across industries. We talked to CEOs of companies ranging from tech giants like Twitter and Google to venture capital firms like Andreessen Horowitz to creative consultancies like IDEO to comedy machines like *Funny or Die* and *Saturday Night Live*. We interviewed political leaders like former U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright about how humour helped her in diplomacy and negotiations when the stakes were high.

We spent an hour playing fetch with a very friendly dog, just to catch a break.

We consumed a boatload of comedy. Naomi spent hundreds of hours going to improv and stand-up shows *by herself* because she couldn't make friends fast enough to sustain her ~~addiction~~ research. Jennifer watched every episode of *SNL* since 1975, made Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime* mandatory reading for all her kids (and students, but they signed up for it), and watched John Mulaney's *Come-*

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*This just means we flew. In coach.

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back Kid so many times that his lines now seep out of her mouth frequently and involuntarily.

Then we stress-tested our ideas to ensure they held up.

We ran workshops at companies like McKinsey, Deloitte, and Forrester. And also a bunch of companies that don't do consulting, but the point is that if management consultants can learn to leverage humour, then there is hope for us all.

We incorporated these principles into talks and coaching with executives and celebrities, from the sets of *The Tonight Show* and *Saturday Night Live* to company all-hands meetings to political campaign speeches to talks delivered at United Nations convenings.

We taught courses with hundreds of Stanford MBAs and executives, who have put our principles into action in ways that exceed our wildest dreams—a serial entrepreneur who created a company manifesto leavened with humour, an engineer who built an art installation to visualize the cultural nuances of humour, a food scientist who proposed to her (then) boyfriend* by creating a comic book of their lives together, and more.

At every turn, our findings challenged the false dichotomy between gravity and levity and uncovered the profound benefits of a life fueled by levity. If there's one thing our research makes clear, it's that we don't need to take ourselves so seriously in order to grapple with serious things.

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* A story involving a "then boyfriend" implies an ending that could go one of two ways. In this case, it was the happy way.

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The balance of gravity and levity gives power to both. Which is, of course, why we're all here.

The Game Plan

If you're anything like the business people we know, you probably love game plans. And road maps. And road maps to navigate game plans. (Maybe a playbook?) So here's what you can expect to find in the chapters ahead.

The humour cliff (*chapter 1*). Before we can learn how to use humour more effectively at work, we need to understand what's holding us back. We'll debunk four of the most common myths about humour at work, and share an important framework for understanding the relationship between levity, humour, and comedy. Then we'll explore four distinct styles of humour and help you identify yours. Because who doesn't love a good typology?

Your brain on humour (*chapter 2*). We'll dig into the science: how our brains are hardwired to respond to humour and laughter, and how humour has been proven in the behavioral research to (among other things) increase perceptions of status, quicken the path to meaningful connection, unlock creativity and innovation, and boost resilience.

The anatomy of funny (*chapter 3*). Next, we'll delve into the world of comedy, understanding what makes something funny, training our brains to look at the world through a different lens, and crafting humour using the techniques of professional comedians.

How we lost 40 lbs with humour (and you can, too!). We're kidding. Chapter 4 has nothing to do with this.

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